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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes Leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply “carrying on the fight,” but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of Leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines

Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to editor.platypusreview@gmail.com. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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About the Platypus Affiliated Society

The Platypus Affiliated Society, established in December 2006, organizes reading groups, public fora, research and journalism focused on problems and tasks inherited from the “Old” (1920s–30s), “New” (1960s–70s) and post-political (1980s–90s) Left for the possibilities of emancipatory politics today.

“Has democratic socialism” continues on page 4

progressives. However, the emergence of a new neoliberalism within the Democratic Party, presaged by Gay Hart’s 1984 presidential run, stymied the project posed by the rise of neoliberalism in the Democrats, which was why, even though DSA did not endorse any Democratic candidate for president in the primaries of 1984, Harrington made sure that we mobilized against Gary Hart’s candidacy. While the realignment strategy, strictly defined, became inoperative when the segregationists left the Democratic Party of their own volition, Harrington’s commitment to socialists operating within the liberal / labor wing of the Democratic Party continued to lie at the core of his political strategy, as *A Failure of Vision* recounts.

Greene’s thesis is explicit: Harrington’s orientation to the Democratic Party surrendered genuine radicalism at the altar of respectability, and this surrender was disastrous for the Left. In my view, Harrington’s concern with respectability was actually a mark of political seriousness. Harrington did not abhor opposition to the status quo; what he abhorred was sectarian isolation from political relevance; in his view, such isolation made opposition to the status quo moot.

Harrington’s Left anti-Communism has always provoked controversy. Greene’s account reveals how Harrington’s version was fundamentally different from Right-wing anti-communism, but stresses that it was still anti-communism nevertheless. Supporters of Michael Harrington would stress here that Left anti-Communism does not denounce non-authoritarian understandings of communism. Greene argues that in the context of the time at least, even Left anti-Communism was politically disastrous. Greene describes Harrington’s defense of democratic rights against McCarthyism of even Communists he regarded as authoritarian. However, for Greene, condemning Communists for authoritarianism was necessarily politically deleterious, because it helped the Right discard the Left. Harrington’s fraught relations with the New Left during the 1960s acts as grist for the anti-anti-Communist mill here. Greene notes — and this is an instance of his intellectual honesty and seriousness — that Harrington did not just dismiss or oppose the New Left. While profoundly critical of an alleged diffidence toward the established labor movement and the need to oppose Stalinism, as well as being apposed to apparent flirtations with insurrectionism, enabling the hidden social democracy to come out into the light. Passage of the Civil Rights Act proved to be enough to prompt the segregationists to switch parties without additional effort from the

Socialist Party by standing above and distancing himself from the nitty gritty of internal factional politics. Rather than trying to be above the fray, in both DSOc and DSA, Mike dove into the weeds of internal factional disputes, albeit with the purpose of diffusing them. In the course of the narrative, Greene cites Harrington’s longtime friend and confidant, Bogdan Denitch, as emphasizing the extent to which Harrington was a “party-builder.” Denitch noted that this commitment involved getting political hands dirty, being somewhat the perceptions of Harrington as “Saint Michael.” I myself felt betrayed when Mike spoke against a stand I took at a DSA national meeting in, if I remember correctly, 1987. I was trying to amend a resolution, whose language, unbeknownst to me, Harrington had helped negotiate. The resolution committed DSA to use its “leverage” in the labor movement to encourage support for Jesse Jackson and the Rainbow Coalition in the 1984 Democratic Party primaries. I argued that DSA should not be telling unions what to do, and that the language about using our leverage understood, in my youthful, albeit stodgy social democratic passion, was how important maintaining DSA unity was to Harrington. (I remember my then girlfriend, now wife, having to patiently explain this to me at the time.) Arguably, my youthful failure of vision is shared by too many of my decidedly non-social democratic counterparts in today’s DSA. When social democratic organizations are fragile, unity is a precious asset to be nurtured.

The commitment to establishing a socialist presence within the Democratic Party’s progressive, liberal wing came to define Harrington’s political strategy. Greene follows what seems to be current Party of the 40s, 50s, and 60s, of advocates of natural development of trade unionists, Civil Rights Movement supporters, feminists, etc. into a mass social democratic movement of the kind that had become a real presence in Western Europe after the end of World War II. The idea was to force the segregationists out of the Democratic Party, and the need to oppose Stalinism, as well as being apposed to apparent flirtations with insurrectionism, enabling the hidden social democracy to come out into the light. Passage of the Civil Rights Act proved to be enough to prompt the segregationists to switch parties without additional effort from the

The Platypus Review

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1 Has democratic socialism been a disaster in the U.S.?

A review of Doug Greene’s *A Failure of Vision: Michael Harrington and the Limits of Democratic Socialism*

Tom Canel

2 Anti-fascism in the Philippines

Back to the 1980s

Daniel Rudin

3 Labor history and the Left

Will Stratford

www:

Revolutionary righteousness

A review of Doug Greene’s *A Failure of Vision: Michael Harrington and the Limits of Democratic Socialism*

Jack Clark

Perpetual motion machines

A response to Canel, Duhalde, and Horras

D. L. Jacobs

A Marxist history of the philosophical perspective

An answer to Alan Woods’s *The History of Philosophy: A Marxist Perspective*

Justin Spiegel and Andreas Wintersperger

platypus1917.org

149

bitterness between himself and many of the New Left generation. (These events are carefully detailed in Greene’s book.) The outcome was particularly bitter for Harrington, in that the old guard’s hostility to the anti-war movement in the 60s and to the New Politics expressed by George McGovern’s 1972 Presidential run, forced an equally bitter split in the Socialist Party between Harrington, his allies and the Rightward moving Old Guard, now led by Max Shachtman. (There was also a third faction that opposed both the war in Vietnam and work in the Democratic Party coalitions to form the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee [DSOC]. As Greene recounts, Harrington was desperate to atone for his mistakes of the 60s, and spent the remainder of his life rebuilding unity of the small-“d” democratic Left. The formation of the Democratic Socialist of America [DSA] out of a merger with the New America Movement (NAM) in 1982 was an important step in this reconciliation. NAM incorporated veterans of the New Left, as well as former Communist Party members and leaders (including Dorothy Healey). The DSOc / NAM merger aspired to mend the rift between the anti-anti-Communist and the anti-Communist democratic Lefts.

My own memories of Harrington in the 1980s are dominated by his commitment to growing the fledgling socialist organization, and to zealously containing the centrifugal internal forces that threatened to tear the hard-won unity of the diverse organization asunder. His commitment to finding a viable consensus within DSA seemed unmitigated. He put great pressure, even on those identified with his politics, on everyone to compromise their demands for the good of building the socialist movement. (I recount my experience of such pressure below.) In this, he should be seen as having been a better socialist leader than Eugene Debs. Debs attempted to maintain unity in a fractious

Doug Greene, *A Failure of Vision: Michael Harrington and the Limits of Democratic Socialism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2022).

biography can become a political treatise. Doug Greene’s recently published biography of Michael Harrington is a case in point: Greene announces the political thrust of the book in its very title: *A Failure of Vision*. Via a well-presented and intellectually honest historical account, Greene seeks to show that Michael Harrington’s influence upon the Left has been fundamentally deleterious: Greene goes as far as to say “disastrous.” In this review, I seek to recognize the high quality of the historical writing found in this book, just as I push back regarding its political stance.

Following youthful involvement in the Catholic Workers’ movement, engagement with New York bohemian, and involvement with the democratic, but distinctly sectarian, socialist politics of Max Shachtman during the 1950s, Harrington became a public figure writing and having published in 1962 a book exposing the reality of poverty in 20th century America. Harrington’s *The Other America*, made an enormous splash, as Greene writes: “By 1965, *The Other America* had sold over 70,000 copies, and gone through at least five editions” (64). Harrington’s book is credited for helping launch Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society and War on Poverty projects. Harrington also became an advisor to the emerging Civil Rights Movement. After a psychic crisis, exacerbated by unexpected public success, Harrington recommitted himself to his socialist affiliations. Determined that the socialist Left break out of its debilitating marginalization, he became America’s oldest “young” socialist, acting as a liaison between the anti-Communist Old Left and the emerging New Left.¹ Given the contrast in historical experience, tensions between these generations of the Left was inevitable, as perhaps was the culmination of those tensions in a bitter breach. However, Harrington himself regretted his exacerbation of those breaches that led to personal

Labor history and the Left

Will Stratford

Introduction
LABOR HISTORY HAS SHOWN ITSELF to be a patently counterrevolutionary field of study, despite its radical bona fides. How one understands the field’s object, labor, is largely determined by one’s understanding of capitalism. Increasingly, however, labor historians conceptualize capitalism in a frivolous manner. They tack on “capitalism” as a loose signifier of wrongdoing, a kind of catchword with diminishing returns, secondary to more fashionable commentary on race, gender, and sexual identity. By appraising labor history’s treatment of class, women, race, capitalism, and revolution, we can better appreciate just how much the field has diverged from classical Leftist and Marxist conceptions of these issues, as they relate to labor in capitalism. We can also specify just how the vicissitudes of labor history reflect those of the contemporaneous Left. As the Left has adopted ideologically, so have labor historians entrenched intellectually: despair with the working class, anti-capitalist moralism, the conflation of bourgeois society and capitalism, the disavowal of social revolution, and particularist identity politics.

State of the field
What is the current state of labor history, and how did it get here? As Geoffrey Field and Michael Hanagan explain in their 2012 retrospective of the previous forty years, labor history reached a worldwide peak in the 60s and 70s, when “Old Labor History” made way for new “social” labor history, which sought to place historical labor in the context of society as a whole, not just labor institutions like unions and parties.¹ But by the 90s, labor history was in serious crisis and under theoretical attack from several directions. The postmodern “linguistic turn” and its deconstruction of meta-narratives were replacing so-called male-oriented and point-of-production based approaches, dismantling many of the field’s longstanding frameworks of modernization, industrialization, and proletarianization. Historians became more comfortable talking about structures of meaning than social or economic structures. This all coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the associated retreat from Marxian approaches in the human sciences. Concretely for labor historians, the glaring reality was that significantly fewer grad students were attracted to the field.

Yet, labor historians remain largely in denial of how the field’s ongoing cultural turn has mirrored contemporary developments in Left-liberal politics, particularly the fractured relationship between the Left and the working class. Neville Kirk has been one of the few to observe that “the fluctuating successes, failures, and appeal of labor history have been closely related to the question of its intellectual and public/political relevance,” especially to avowed radical movements.² Similarly, William Sewell writes, “women’s history has retained an intellectual vitality that labor history has lost,” since it “remains far more lively, self-confident, and aggressive than the contemporary labor movement.” Disappointingly, Sewell suggests as a remedy that labor historians pay more attention to the most quickly expanding forms of work today — service and clerical work, information, consulting, etc. — which would only reinforce historians’ presentism.³

The cultural turn in labor history expresses the Left’s contemporaneous shift to identity politics. As John Womack rightly laments, labor history has come to serve as a progressive bastion of the culture wars, particularly the crusade to champion inclusion and multiculturalism. As the students of E. P. Thompson have become the new leaders of the field, writes Womack, labor history has grown obsessed with moral stories of right and wrong, while questions of industry and technology have gone unasked. “These labor historians practically redefine the field as a general history of injustice,” namely by conflating work with *feelings*, as part of an effort to make the field relevant within the neoliberal “intellectual marketplace.”⁴ At the other end, Sewell argues that labor history should demonstrate the interlacing of culture and politics with the otherwise “reductive materialist rhetorical paradigm” of production and exchange, while for Marcel van der Linden, the explosion of methodological perspectives since the 80s lacks cohesion and creates the impression of fragmentation. As a remedy, van der Linden proposes a “global labor history” that reveals connections between “world regions” and broadens our definition of the working class to include all “commodified labor.”⁵ Prasannan Parthasarathi suggests, however, that while methodological issues are important, they cannot bring the field to life. In its place are needed “questions in labor history that lead organically to a global framework” — namely, questions about historical causality via comparative economic history, which “requires abandoning capitalism as a category of historical analysis,” due to its “Eurocentric” and “anachronistic” character.⁶ As these dialogues make clear, labor historians have abandoned Marxism in favor of today’s default frameworks for grasping class and labor: communitarianism and neo-empiricism. They call for the abandonment of the concept of capitalism and question the value of class as an analytic tool compared to “other forms of identity.”⁷ As a consequence, the field has increasingly assumed a positive-affirmative characterization of work, which van der Linden defines as “the purposive production of useful objects or services.”⁸ Such a reification of work reinforces bourgeois-capitalist ideology in its half-truth, leaving out the fuller proletarian perspective of work as alienating under capitalism.

Labor historians commonly assume work to be a transhistorical public good over which identity groups must continuously fight for a greater share, betraying a bias for multi-cultural capitalism — neoliberalism — rather than socialism. Effectively, the enduring cultural turn and neo-empiricism of labor history tails the Left, whose own engagement in culture wars and fact-checking tails the exigencies of capitalism itself.

Labor and class
The naturalization of labor as “good” brings us to the issue of how labor historians treat class as a category of historical analysis, and what academic discourse on class eschews. Today, the most entrenched assumptions about class center on what the Hungarian Marxian philosopher G. M. Tamás calls the “angelic view of the exploited.” The angelic treatment, popularized by both Karl Polanyi and E. P. Thompson, recovers the working class on the basis of “a proud self-representation through a legitimizing ethic.”⁹ We see this explicitly in Thompson’s attempts to revise our views of “the crowd” in pre-industrial England as not just mechanical responses to economic stimuli but as “historical agents.” As he contends in “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” the contemporary economy was “moral” precisely because (bread) prices were in some degree set by the crowd’s organized pressure to abide the traditional “moral” price, not simply by “paternalist” authorities or the market. Thompson helps color in the cultural details of an otherwise quick-and-ready generalization of the “direct popular action” involved in price-setting and bread riots, but his New Left revisionism unleashed a torrent of moralistic motives for recovering historically marginal peoples that has continued to this day, and at some cost.¹⁰ Ever since his monumental project to rescue the unenlightened working class “from the enormous condescension of posterity,” a sentimental, fundamentally affirmative agenda has crept in through the backdoor of labor history.¹¹ Historians now reappropriate the working class in a conservative manner — as a virtuous, self-created cultural object to be preserved.

Unlike labor history’s “angelic” ideal of a positive and moral working class, notes Tamás, the “demonic” view of Marxism foregrounds the negative, dialectical character of the working class in capitalism, in its abject, propertyless “proletarian” condition. Labor history expresses the Left’s conflation of the working class and the proletariat by glossing over the epochal distinction between the rise of “bourgeois society” and its subsequent disintegration into “capitalism.” Bourgeois modernity heralded the emancipatory, enlightened ideal of “labor” — the social valorization of anonymous, objectified productive activity, independent of bloodline — against thousands of years of antiquity, during which concepts of work (as bondage) and freedom (of the noble caste) diverged. The pre-capitalist bourgeois era, roughly from the Renaissance through the Age of Revolution (1789–1848), was defined by the conflict of bourgeois “rebellious universalism” versus aristocratic “particularism.”¹² The bourgeois-democratic revolt of the Third Estate served to abolish caste society, not to pit a particular class interest against another. As the intellectual historian Martin Burke observes, it was not until the mid-19th century that “‘class’ went from being a relatively neutral to a rather contested term.”¹³

What changed? Ever since the Industrial Revolution, the machine production of capital has undermined human labor, meaning that “free labor” ideology has taken on the deceitful character of bourgeois ideology in denial of capitalism — and thus class — itself. Unlike labor historians, Tamás acknowledges the historical proletarianization of the working class, no longer characterized by its “excellence, superiority or merit” but “its being robbed of its very humanity.” The newly proletarian working class, he writes, is marked out by the “demonic” simultaneity of its contradictory interests: “one, to preserve itself as an estate with its own institutions [trade unions, working-class parties, a socialist press, instruments of self-help, etc.]; and another one, to defeat its antagonist and to abolish itself as a class.” That is, “the truth of class is of its own transcendence.”¹⁴ Indeed, this was always the historical significance of dialectics for the Marxist Left, from Engels to Trotsky. It is precisely the workers’ alienated condition in capitalism that historically made the goal of socialism possible and desirable.

Labor historians today simply cannot abide what the classical Marxist Left grasped plainly: modern class relations stem directly from industrial capitalism, not the Bourgeois Revolution. The trajectory of labor history mirrors what Tamás refers to as the increasingly counterrevolutionary character of the historical Left in the 20th century: “the abolition of caste leads to equality; but the abolition of class leads to socialism. Yet, as we have seen, the retreat from socialism to egalitarianism . . . from critical theory to ahistorical moral critique . . . has been the rule rather than the exception.”¹⁵ Instead of addressing these considerations, labor historians have either reappropriated the working class in a moralistic-affirmative manner or subsumed it into postmodern discursive subalternity.¹⁶ Since the late 20th century, Martin Burke notes, historians “continue to disagree over its [class’s] salience in their analytic triumvirate of race, class, and gender.”¹⁷ Today more than ever, in the era of woke capitalism, class as a category of historical

analysis would need to be made more uncomfortable and “demonic” if we were to begin dreaming of classlessness the way that historical socialists once did.

Labor and women
Having gravitated toward the two banal questions, “Did women work?” and, “Was this good or bad for women?,” recent historians of female labor have fluctuated between manic celebrations of women as heroic agents of their own history and sermonizing chronicles of women’s perpetual suffering. Both are one-sided oversimplifications. These revisionist histories distort the two-sided nature of capitalist development — simultaneously spreading and restricting bourgeois freedom. Furthermore, they fail to distinguish between embourgeoisement and proletarianization, confounding our understanding of how women’s relationship to labor has changed over time.

Numerous works on the pre-industrial bourgeois era occupy themselves with how women’s work compared unfavorably with men’s. Over one hundred years ago, Fabian socialist Alice Clark raised the question, did the epochal shift to modern bourgeois society diminish women’s autonomy and procreative capacities? In short, her answer was yes: the supplanting of feudal-yeoman relations by early manufacture dissolved the mutually dependent husband-wife relations of “family industry.”¹⁸ Yet, Clark’s question lacks the historical awareness that the very criterion of individual autonomy is itself a historical product of bourgeois modernity, rendering her question anachronistic. As Barbara Hanawalt notes, while the pre-bourgeois family economy appears to have provided more security and dignity to women’s work, it also restricted their sphere of activity.¹⁹ Nevertheless, most recent monographs seek to revise traditional liberal and Marxist historical accounts by denying the significance of bourgeois emancipation from rural caste society altogether. Looking back at the Renaissance, Natalie Zemon Davis suggests that the patriarchal character of society actually increased during early embourgeoisement, as women were dealt a “thinner occupational identity” than men, as though this were commensurate to a patriarch’s absolute dominion over his wife and daughters in traditional society, which included the right to abuse or kill them without repercussion.²⁰

In the scholarship of the industrial capitalist era, the most sophisticated histories underline how the changing role of women’s labor has reflected the self-contradictory character of capitalism itself, as simultaneous embourgeoisement and proletarianization. Angelina Chin’s history of early 20th-century South China examines how women’s emancipation (*jiefang*) developed in a dialectical manner. Millions of young women gained unprecedented social autonomy through their income and urban identity as domestic servants, waitresses, singers, and prostitutes, even while their increased visibility triggered new forms of female population control by the capitalist state, such as prostitution licenses and citizenship requirements that disenfranchised lower-class women. That is, the expansion of social freedom and domination developed inseparably in capitalism.²¹

Leaders of the field, however, fall back on prevailing neoliberal tropes of anti-Enlightenment despair, postmodernist particularism, and cultural identity formation. Joan Scott and Louise Tilly, for instance, seek to refute any connection between women’s modern identity as workers and their newfound political rights.²² Amanda Vickery’s essay “Golden Age to Separate Spheres?” debunks hyperbolic stories of women’s disempowerment following an imagined golden age of women’s work before bourgeois modernity, but her postmodernist scythe cuts down all grand narratives, especially Marxism.²³ Her own research aims to deny that class society has ever existed, and rewrites local elites as culturally inclusive.²⁴ Alex Owen’s feminist history of Victorian spiritualism argues that the gendering of the female sex as spiritually gifted was at once “liberating and restricting.” While on the surface a dialectical thesis, her book ultimately trades in women’s socio-political disenfranchisement for their newfound status as repositories of divine communication, concluding that spiritual mediumship could sabotage gender power dynamics and “infringe culturally imposed limits.”²⁵ Celebrating women’s cultural power amidst their limited social power represents a rather low bar of emancipation. The inverse — recognizing a culturally marginalized practice as a socially productive practice within capitalism — offers more insight. In her history of colonial Nairobi, Luise White situates prostitution as *constitutive* of male wage-labor, serving the “reproduction of male labor power and family formations” by “restoring, flattering, and reviving male energies.”²⁶ Prostitution is revealed to be a contributor to the total production of capital rather than an isolated moral taboo, as capitalism has come to commodify *all* labor, including the most feminized social roles in bourgeois culture. As Joan Robinson once wrote, “The misery of being exploited by capitalists is nothing compared to the misery of not being exploited at all.”²⁷

Labor and race
The neoliberal culture wars have moved race to the forefront of the Left’s political imagination, reaching ever-higher points of absurdity up to the present. As race has come to dominate our academic and political vocabulary, dogmatic appeals to political correctness have often replaced critical thinking. In this case, labor history has not only mirrored the degeneration of the Left but deliberately mimicked it, cashing in on the vogue of wokeness. Reflecting the Left’s race-first view of capitalism, “whiteness” and “history of capitalism” scholarship has committed to a racial essentialist and moralizing view of the past, obscuring how class processes

have operated organically within and across racially identified populations.

In the 1990s, David Roediger’s *The Wages of Whiteness* (1991) launched the whiteness paradigm in labor history, explicitly motivated “in reaction to the appalling extent to which white male workers voted for Reaganism in the 1980s,” as admitted in the book’s afterword.²⁸ As Eric Arnesen recounts in “Whiteness and the Historical Imagination,” whiteness scholars have championed the politics of racial identity and diminished the significance of historical cross-race alliances.²⁹ Labor history has exhibited mounting disquietude around the field’s traditional subject, the working class, as a function of the Left’s political relinquishment of American workers going back to the New Left. But the Millennial Left has made a virtue out of competing neoliberal interest groups by consecrating their cultural identities and ritualizing white guilt and black victimhood. The racialist turn in scholarship expresses a symptom of this trend.

As Barbara Fields explains, “race studies” scholars generally reinforce the “biological reality of race,” contributing to the American practice of “creating and re-creating race.” In their use of racial prejudice as an explanation for historical events, these scholars assume race itself as a natural cause existing outside of history. Fields, following David Brion Davis’s *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (1975), traces how the “ideology” of race was first constructed in the American Revolutionary era, when in the context of ascendant universal inalienable rights, the condition of slaves began to appear as a patent anomaly, leading advocates and opponents alike to surmise that such a lack of freedom stemmed from some innate incapacity of the slaves themselves. Thus, in the context of creeping social transformation, contemporaries rationalized slavery via the modern tendency to overestimate individual temperament and underestimate social context, or, what social psychology calls “fundamental attribution error.” Although many historians contend that black Americans have been repressed because they were viewed as inferior, this actually gets it backwards: blacks were eventually viewed as inferior *by virtue of having been repressed*.³⁰ Regrettably, many labor historians still operate in the racialist paradigm, such as Jacqueline Jones, who argues that black women have experienced capitalism in a fundamentally different way compared to whites and men because of their greater victimhood.³¹ Such oppression-one-upmanship of racial identities foregoes the need to overcome race. Doing penance replaces the unfinished struggle for universal liberty.

The increasingly tendentious character of Left-liberal scholarship has culminated in the “history of capitalism” field that emerged after the Great Recession of 2008. As Erik Mathisen observes, this new literature has come on the scene “at a moment when a profound pessimism about the all-encompassing and immutable power of race has charged the public discussion.” On the whole, this new field emphasizes slavery’s constitutive role for the development of American capitalism. Rather than merely acknowledge that the slave-based cotton industry helped fuel America’s industrial revolution, these historians assert that plantation slavery made modern capitalism possible in the first place, by generating vast profits to finance early industry and innovating forms of labor exploitation that have dominated the globe ever since.³² Although “most recent historians of American capitalism have shown little interest in theory,” the emplotment is clear: the original sin of the present is located in Americans’ historic racism and greed.³³ These historical revisions explicitly deny the import of the Civil War and the emancipation of African-Americans, who apparently had no hope to succeed in post-war America.

But the crux of their methodological nihilism is the denial of human agency as a source of historical change. Hence, the Civil War did not result from slavery and its detractors but from infighting between Northern and Southern capitalists, who were otherwise essentially the same. Bourgeois revolution, free labor, civil society, and abolitionism are omitted from the historical record. All in all, the field’s reiteration of the limitations of blacks and the moral culpability of the rich legitimizes and is legitimized by the impotent identity politics of the Left today.

Labor and capitalism
Even more than class, sex, and race, the category of capitalism — precisely as an “ism” — involves all sorts of contested meanings and significances as it relates to the history of labor. In recent decades, scholars have searched for capitalism across the longue durée, thus missing its historical specificity as a post-industrial condition. Semantically, Jürgen Kocka points out, “capitalism” is really a product of the 19th century, when opponents began specifying the object of their criticism, “capitalism,” as a polemical concept.³⁴ These initial critics of overproduction, unemployment, and the self-destruction of value recognized capitalism as a *sui generis* crisis of bourgeois society, the latter itself only a few hundred years old. Despite its name, notes Jonathan Levy, “history of capitalism” scholarship lacks a theory of capitalism, and concerns itself primarily with tracing particular commodities through space and time.³⁵ Two prominent examples include David Graeber’s *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (2010) and Sven Beckert’s *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (2014). Common to both works is the condemnation of not only capitalism but laboring, or, “bourgeois” society more generally, maligned as inherently violent and imperialist.

“History of capitalism” scholarship’s indictment of modernity rests on a conflation of pre-industrial and post-industrial bourgeois society, both collapsed into “capitalism.” According to Graeber, modern

market economies based on barter and money encouraged non-trustful exchange, reducing moral obligations to a financial value and destroying the “baseline communism” that was the foundation of ancient social relations — echoing Alain Badiou’s transhistorical “communist invariant.”³⁶ Graeber’s rose-tinted view of premodern societies thus elides the historically specific consciousness of bourgeois society, whose “unsocial sociability” 18th-century contemporaries grasped as an emancipation from feudalism.

Beckert’s book, tracking the rise and fall of the European-dominated modern cotton empire, argues that “war capitalism” was the foundation for later industrial capitalism. Yet, defining war capitalism as the combination of slavery, imperial expansion, armed trade, and entrepreneurial sovereignty begs the question, why call this “capitalism” at all? So defined, this type of regime pertains more to premodern empires than to modern bourgeois ones. By identifying mass expropriation of land and forced labor as the “crucial preconditions” for Europe’s economic world dominance by the 19th century, Beckert cannot account for how the empires based on tributary conquest and extractive slave-labor economies — the Spanish and Portuguese — fell behind, while those based on free labor and colonial market autonomy — the Dutch and English — led industrialization.³⁷ The conflation of pre- and post-industrial bourgeois society also obscures the changed, brutalized character of colonization and slave labor as a function of capitalism in the 19th century.

Conceptualizing “capitalism” also turns on our clarification of the capitalist state. At one end of the spectrum, Charles Tilly’s *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1990* (1990) defines the modern state with extreme breadth, drawing attention to supposed continuity across the last millennia. Tilly argues that diverse states eventually converged on the modern nation-state model, based on the confluence of capital and military coercion, because these were historically the most overpowering. However, his definition of capital as “tangible mobile resources, and enforceable claims on such resources,” along with his assertion that “capitalists” have worked as merchants, entrepreneurs, and financiers for most of human history, betray methodological anachronism. Such a “generously” conceptualized historical account of the capitalist state precludes historical accuracy altogether.³⁸

Conversely, Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward’s *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (1971) helps spotlight what is distinctive about the capitalist state in human history. The modern state, they argue, must be grasped as a function of the larger social and political order peculiar to the capitalist era. The modern welfare relief system, unique to capitalism, reveals some of its qualities. U.S. welfare has historically expanded during periods of social unrest, such as the Great Depression and the 1960s, and contracted during subsequent stabilization. As this cyclical pattern shows, periodic welfare expansion is “designed to mute civil order,” and welfare contraction to reinforce work norms. Such a critique of the welfare state concretizes capitalist “creative destruction” by showing how state relief functions as a palliative for inherent instabilities of capitalism. The specific role of the capitalist state comprises the “regulation of marginal labor” and “maintenance of civil order.”³⁹ While all societies have coerced their members into social contribution, only capitalism relies mainly on mechanisms of market — promise of financial reward or penalties — to do so.

Labor and revolution

Leftists have traditionally distinguished long-term *social revolution* from more acute *political revolution*, the latter involving regime change but not necessarily a change in social practice or basis. Against revisionist histories that conflate social and political revolution, reducing for instance the French Revolution to a discrete political event disconnected from ongoing social revolution, Neil Davidson reinstates the revolutionary status of the “bourgeois revolutions,” whose early theorists James Harrington, Sir James Steuart, and Antoine Barnave — not to mention Locke, Rousseau, and Smith — had already developed a materialist understanding of revolutionary social change *before* their corresponding political watersheds of 1688, 1776, and 1789.⁴⁰ Revisionist histories purporting to debunk the Bourgeois Revolution assume a narrow sociological definition in which industrialists, bankers, and other representatives of the “bourgeoisie” played leading roles, eschewing the more substantial criterion for bourgeois revolution: the replacement of feudal, patrimonial fetters with the bourgeois mode of production based on free labor and an autonomous realm of civil society, all of which could exist where autocratic political forms still persisted, such as in the central European states of the 19th century.⁴¹ Even if, as William Sewell suggests, workers’ values and ideals from the Old Regime to 1848 featured the continuity of an “artisan ethos” — preservation of social order, pursuit of the common good, insistence on the value of one’s trades, pride in work — by the time of the French Revolution, these values constituted *bourgeois* ideals of cooperative social production more so than the hierarchical cosmology of medieval “estates.”⁴² The persistence of corporatist language signaled a superficial vestige masking a more substantial social transformation.

In the American context, Eric Foner frames the Civil War as a relatively late but unmistakable instance of bourgeois revolution, as the new Republican Party of the 1850s developed an explicit “free labor” ideology in opposition to the slave labor of the South. If the presidential victory of a party dedicated to free labor precipitated Confederate

secession and ensuing civil war, support for Abraham Lincoln had been made possible by the gradual social revolution of the preceding decades — the decline of indentured servitude, the end of live-in journeymen with their employers, and what Gordon Woods called the overall “transvaluation of labor,” whereby *freedom to labor* replaced *freedom from labor* as a social basis. This process was tantamount to the maturation of bourgeois society in the North, sharpening the contradiction with the manorial, aristocratic South, based on unfree labor. But by the late 19th century, decades after the Civil War, American society had clearly developed the same new contradiction between capital and labor that had marked out the revolutions of 1848 in Europe, as wage labor no longer appeared as a temporary condition leading to economic independence but as a fixed feature of industrial society.⁴³

The period of the late 19th and early 20th centuries represented the highpoint of not only the trade-unionist “labor movement,” but also of the non-identical but deeply intertwined socialist movement, represented globally by the Second International (1889–1916). In the American context, David Montgomery traces the rise and fall of the labor movement, which was in decline by the 1920s, when strike activity fell to an all-time low, labor radicalism became isolated, workers’ attention turned inward to family and ethical ties, and trade unions definitively made peace with the undemocratic exigencies of capitalism.⁴⁴ But it was in Russia that the socialist movement’s revolutionary potential finally materialized in 1917. Most Western historiography of the October Revolution has projected a Cold War “totalitarian” framework back onto 1917, drawing a straight line from Lenin to Stalin. Sheila Fitzpatrick in part reminds us that the Bolsheviks undoubtedly won the moral authority of the working masses in the first years of the revolution.⁴⁵ While Montgomery and Fitzpatrick recognize the gradual decline of the international socialist movement beginning as early as the 1920s, Eric Hobsbawm’s student Donald Sassoon insists that the “epic struggle between socialism and capitalism” lasted from the 1889 establishment of the Second International to the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall and subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union.⁴⁶ However, by conflating the earlier revolutionary socialist movement with later social democratic and communist European parties, increasingly focused on national welfare policies and parliamentary coalitions, Sassoon covers up how the movement failed based on its own original goals of social, not just political, revolution.

Conclusion

By and large, neither labor historians nor the Left possess a revolutionary imagination today, and increasingly neither professes to. Capitalism’s revolutionary potential remains obscure to its would-be annihilators, who fall back on the shallow “anti-capitalism” of progressives who form its loyal opposition. Labor history, by tailing contemporary political shifts of capitalism, has adopted the moralistic personalism inaugurated by the anti-party New Left and crystallized by the identitarian Millennial Left. Increasingly, labor history fails to distinguish between prescriptive and descriptive definitions of labor — how labor *should* be defined versus how it was defined and valorized historically. By simply keeping this straight, they could identify as false problems the disputes surrounding “who” the bourgeoisie or the proletariat were. Tailing the vulgar identity politics of our time, historians often presume a demographic meaning of categories pertaining to labor, whether of class, sex, or race. Such profiling takes the individual as the reified unit of what are in fact social changes — the embourgeoisement, proletarianization, gendering, and racializing of laboring society — all very much historical processes and each a function of capitalism, the historical process of modernity, for Marxists. **IP**

¹ Geoffrey Field and Michael Hanagan, “ILWCH: Forty Years On,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 82 (Fall 2012): 5–14.

² Neville Kirk, “Taking Stock: Labor History During the Past Fifty Years,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 82 (Fall 2012): 157.

³ William H. Sewell Jr., “Toward a Post-Materialist Rhetoric for Labor History,” in *Rethinking Labor History: Essays on Discourse and Class Analysis*, ed. Lenard R. Bernstein (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 15–17, 26.

⁴ John Womack Jr., “Doing Labor History: Feeling, Work, Material Power,” *Journal of the Historical Society* 5, no. 3 (2005): 266, 269–70, 275, 277.

⁵ Marcel van der Linden, “Editorial: The End of Labour History?,” *International Review of Social History* 38, no. S1 (1993): 2; Marcel van der Linden, “The Promises and Challenges of Global Labor History,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 82 (Fall 2012): 62, 66.

⁶ Prasannan Parthasarathi, “Global Labor History: A Dialogue with Marcel van der Linden,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 82 (Fall 2012): 108–11.

⁷ Field and Hanagan, “ILWCH: Forty Years On,” 8.

⁸ van der Linden, “The Promises and Challenges,” 65.

⁹ G. M. Tamás, “Telling the Truth about Class,” *Socialist Register* 42 (2006): 230, 254, available online at <https://socialistregister.com/index.php/srv/article/view/5852/2748>.

¹⁰ E. P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” *Past & Present* 50 (1971): 76, 78, 126.

¹¹ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: V. Gollancz, 1963), 14.

¹² Tamás, “Telling the Truth,” 254–55.

¹³ Martin J. Burke, *The Conundrum of Class: Public Discourse on the Social Order in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 53.

¹⁴ Tamás, “Telling the Truth,” 229–30, 243–44, 254–56.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 245.

¹⁶ For a thoughtful example of the latter, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal, 1890–1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

¹⁷ Burke, *The Conundrum of Class*, xi–xii.

¹⁸ Alice Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (London: George Routledge & Sons, Ltd, 1919).

¹⁹ *Women and Work in Preindustrial Europe*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

²⁰ Natalie Zemon Davis, “Women in the Crafts in Sixteenth-

Century Lyon,” in *Women and Work in Preindustrial Europe*, 169.

²¹ Angelina S. Chin, *Bound to Emancipate: Working Women and Urban Citizenship in Early Twentieth-Century China and Hong Kong* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 240.

²² Joan Scott and Louise Tilly, “Women’s Work and the Family in Nineteenth-Century Europe,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 17, no. 1 (1975): 36–64.

²³ Amanda Vickery, “Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women’s History,” *The Historical Journal* 36, no. 2 (1993): 383–414.

²⁴ Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman’s Daughter: Women’s Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

²⁵ Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 9, 11.

²⁶ Luise White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 11.

²⁷ Joan Robinson, *Economic Philosophy* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1962), 45.

²⁸ David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1999), 188.

²⁹ Eric Arnesen, “Whiteness and the Historians’ Imagination,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 60 (Fall 2001): 4–5.

³⁰ Barbara J. Fields, “Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America” *New Left Review* 181 (May/June 1990): 95–97, 101, 106.

³¹ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 2010 [first published in 1985]).

³² Eric Williams’s *Capitalism & Slavery* (1945), arguing that Atlantic slavery bankrolled British industrialization, serves as a touchstone work for the recent field. For a self-defense and exhibition of the new “history of capitalism,” see *American Capitalism: New Histories*, eds. Sven Beckert and Christine Desan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

³³ Erik Mathisen, “The Second Slavery, Capitalism, and Emancipation in Civil War America,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 8, no. 4 (2018): 683, 690. For a criticism of the field and its lack of theory, see Scott R. Nelson, “Who Put Their Capitalism in My Slavery?,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 5, no. 2 (2015): 289–310.

³⁴ Jürgen Kocka, “Writing the History of Capitalism,” *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 47 (Fall 2010): 9.

³⁵ Jonathan Levy, “Capital as Process and the History of Capitalism,” *Business History Review* 91, no. 3 (Autumn 2017): 483.

³⁶ David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2011), 99; Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis* (London: Verso, 2010), 35. See also Chris Cutrone, “The Marxist hypothesis: A response to Alain Badiou’s ‘communist hypothesis,’” *Platypus Review* 29 (November 2010), available online at <https://platypus1917.org/2010/11/06/the-marxist-hypothesis-a-response-to-alain-badous-communist-hypothesis/>.

³⁷ Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), xv–xvi.

³⁸ Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1990* (Cambridge: B. Blackwell, 1990), 17.

³⁹ Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), xiii, xvi, 4.

⁴⁰ Neil Davidson, *How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012), xii, 4.

⁴¹ Early examples of revisionism include François Furet, “Le catéchisme révolutionnaire,” *Annales: Histoire, Science Sociales* 26, no. 2 (1971): 255–289, and J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1688–1832: Ideology, Social Structure, and Political Practice during the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

⁴² William H. Sewell Jr., *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 13.

⁴³ Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), xiii–xiv, xxii, xxvi; Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1992), 277.

⁴⁴ David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865–1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 7–8.

⁴⁵ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017 [first published in 1982]), 43–44.

⁴⁶ Donald Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism: The West European Left in the Twentieth Century* (New York: New Press, 1996), xix.

“Has democratic socialism,” cont. from page 1

Harrington later acknowledged and deeply regretted that some of his decisive responses to the alleged failings of the New Left were overly harsh to the extent of being destructive.² Greene acknowledges Harrington’s remorse about ill-considered actions, but notes that Harrington never abandoned the Left anti-Communist values that precipitated them. For supporters of Harrington such as myself, he made tragic mistakes of judgment during the 60s, for which he took full responsibility. We feel that he more than atoned for them through invaluable contributions during the 70s and 80s. Some on the Left though, Greene included, argue that the mistakes went beyond interpersonal tonal stridency. At stake here is the identification of the nature of Stalinism’s betrayal — Harrington thought of Soviet and Chinese Communism and the like as instances of Stalinism — of socialism: are the crimes of Stalinism better understood as being the suppression of basic civil liberties and political rights by authoritarians usurping a socialist identity, as Harrington would have claimed, or is it better to consider them as consisting primarily of the strangling of the post-1917 revolutionary wave, as some in the Platypus Affiliated Society would aver? (Challenging the latter view, one might argue that it was historical reality, not Stalinism, that strangled the post-October revolutionary wave.) Like it or not, as Pabloites have always pointed out, subsequent actual attempts at constructing revolutionary post-capitalist society were predominantly Stalinist in nature.

Harrington’s work within the Socialist International (SI) in the 80s demonstrated that he had learned from his mistakes of the 60s. Not only did he, as is recorded in *A Failure of Vision*, help to rebuild the SI as an organization of some effectiveness, he used his credibility as a known Left anti-Communist to advocate for the SI to be supportive of the revolutionary Sandinista regime in Nicaragua and the FDR / FMLN³ in El Salvador. He supported his own organization, DSA, working closely with a Central America solidarity movement that shared as uncritical a stance towards third-world revolutionary movements as that expressed by the New Left in the 60s. He was able to articulate carefully modulated critiques of illiberal actions by the Sandinistas, without creating the kind of damaging fallout that tarnished his less measured

interventions of the 60s. Since I first encountered Harrington speaking at a 1979 DSO Youth Section conference, his good work of the 80s inevitably stands out for me more than the mistakes of the 60s.

The unifying thread of Greene’s argument is that Harrington’s desire for respectability belied genuine radicalism and this was disastrous for the Left. Specifically, Greene argues that this desire led to the realignment strategy and its allegedly “disastrous” consequences. I would start my defense of the realignment strategy and its latter-day counterparts by recasting the desire for respectability imputed to Harrington as being, rather, an abhorrence of sectarian isolation. Given the unbearable horrors of capitalist reality, the Left forgoing effectiveness in mitigating, let alone overcoming, those horrors, by isolating itself from the political mainstream has been the real disaster.

Harrington was clear that sectarianism toward the hard Left can be as problematic as sectarianism toward liberalism, and he viewed his own mistakes of the 60s as an example of the former variety of sectarianism. An example of this: Harrington and his allies being late to advocate unilateral and unconditional U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam. For too long they called for a military ceasefire to be followed by negotiations, rather than the unconditional withdrawal of troops. (Greene gives a good account of this in the book.) While in 1965, one could argue that the Negotiations Now position was in line with mainstream anti-war sentiment, and advocating that position was the most effective way to leverage popular sentiment to end the war. But, by 1968, as Greene relates, anti-war sentiment had clearly gone beyond just calling for a ceasefire and negotiations, and it was sectarian misjudgment for Harrington and his comrades not to realize that.

Was engagement with the Democratic coalition by socialists disastrous for the Left, as Greene claims? I would argue that on the contrary, engagement with the Democratic Party, whether in the form of Communist Party support for the New Deal in the 1930s or support for Bernie Sanders and the Squad today, has been much more positive than negative, enabling Leftists to at least begin to break out of stifling isolation. To counter this argument, opponents of this orientation to the Democratic Party have to demonstrate that, on the contrary, this engagement had measurably negative results, and made outcomes substantively worse. The above claims cannot be demonstrated, because they are simply not true. For example, the American working class would not have rushed to the revolutionary politics of the Trotskyist Socialist Workers’ Party or even the centrist (in between revolutionary and reformist) politics of Norman Thomas’s Socialist Party, if the Communists had not encouraged support for Roosevelt and the New Deal. Twists in the Comintern line notwithstanding, the Communists were *following* the workers, not the other way around. Today, Leftists breaking with Bernie and the Squad would not lead to the constitution of a mass revolutionary party or movement, but just return the Left (including DSA if it were to go down this route) into a state of isolation. The only times that the Left has been able to grow outside of the Democratic Party, is when movements, such as that of the anti-Vietnam War movement, have gained traction outside of the Democratic Party. However, progressive movements disconnected from the Democratic Party are unlikely to gain much traction today. As Harrington always pointed out at many a speech at DSA Youth Section conferences in the 1980s, roughly 99% of the social movement people we would need to reach to build a socialist bloc, are, currently at least, accessible only via the Democratic Party. Today at least, access to social movements, like labor, racial-justice coalitions, feminism, and LGBTQ+ necessitates engagement with the Democrats. Platypus writers have concluded from this that we should stand aloof from social movements, at least as they are currently constituted, and acknowledge ourselves to be in a pre-political stage. Immersion in the social movements currently arguably involves liquidation into the Democratic Party. For those Leftists who refuse to remain pre-political by staying aloof from mass movements, there is, I claim, no viable alternative but full engagement with the Democrats.

A Failure of Vision is both a work of history and a political treatise. Its quality as a book of history is exemplified in the intellectual honesty of providing substantive detail, even when that detail complicates the political case being made. Greene does not obscure the complexities and nuances of Harrington, either as a person or as a political actor. I admire *A Failure of Vision* as a book of history. (Everyone should rush out to buy it!) With respect to its political thrust though, I respectfully demur. **IP**

¹ Capital-“C” “Communism” is here understood as “official Communism” of the Communist Parties of the Soviet Union, China, etc., whereas lowercase-“c” “communism” should be understood in a more general sense. Similarly, capitalized “Socialist” refers to a specific organization(s), while “socialist” denotes the more general meaning.

² For details see both *Failure of Vision* and Maurice Isserman’s equally excellent but more sympathetic biography, *The Other America: The Life of Michael Harrington* (New York: Public Affairs Press, 2000).

³ Frente Democratico Revolucionario / Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional.

Anti-fascism in the Philippines

Back to the 1980s

Daniel Rudin

LIBERAL PARTY VOTERS IN the Philippines, like the Democrats in the United States, seldom admit the project with which they have long been associated — neoliberalism — is in terminal crisis.¹ Walden Bello is one of the few Filipino Leftists who recognizes both the *historical* character of the crisis and the extent to which the “center-Left’s” association with neoliberalism “tarnished the progressive spectrum as a whole.”² While the Left failed to make good on a state of affairs to which, as neoliberalism’s most ardent critic, it had contributed, the same is not so for Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte.³

Duterte took up the project of overthrowing the status quo that the Left had begun.⁴ He appropriated the anti-globalization movement’s demands for protective tariffs, the labor movement’s anti-contractual campaign,⁵ and even invited members of the Left associated with the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) into his cabinet. The alliance quickly collapsed, leading *World Socialist Web Site* writer Joseph Scalice to condemn the CPP’s opportunism.⁶ In response, CPP founder Joma Sison accused Scalice and other “Trotskyite wreckers” of discrediting and thus preventing it from opposing Duterte’s drug war.⁷

Bello interprets Duterte’s (short-lived) détente with the Left as proof of his “fascist originality.” Duterte is a charismatic authoritarian resting on a “heated” multiclass base allowing for the “violation of basic human, civil, and political rights” in contradiction with “liberal democracy or social democracy.”⁸ Duterte’s middle-class base leads the “larger stratum” of the working class and poor in “passive consent”⁹ — much like Italian fascism, where the “middle strata” waged a counterrevolution against an insurgent Italian Socialist Party.¹⁰ Rather than repressing socialism (a politics notably absent today), Duterte represents a broader counterrevolution against the liberal democratic consensus.¹¹ This recalls Samuel Huntington, for whom the “third wave” democratization (1974–90) of authoritarian states like the Philippines was in danger of being reversed, as in the 1920s and 1960s.¹² Is today’s counterrevolution against the revolutionary “third wave”?

Not exactly. Bello considers neoliberalism as a crisis that is both *objective* — the financial recession of 2008 — and *subjective*, the “popular alienation from the system.”¹³ The latter, *subjective* response was delayed in America, where disappointment and defeat under Obama consolidated neoliberalism’s mandate.¹⁴ The Left’s hopes for a new “New Deal” were based on a perceived potential in Obama’s electoral base that “cut across class, color, gender, and generational lines.”¹⁵ Yet the Party’s identity-group constituencies (blacks-gays-women) were at variance with its labor “Left.” The Democrats had no interest in mobilizing a broad popular vote that would threaten the integration of the coalition’s component parts.¹⁶

In the Philippines, the ruling Liberal Party — to which Bello’s own Citizen’s Action Party (Akbayan) tied its fortunes — drew only “fragile legitimacy” from its middle-class base. As Aquino’s “liberal bloc” collapsed, Bello resigned from his position in Congress — and Akbayan. Bello has since urged progressives to forgo compromise with “dying neoliberalism.”¹⁷ Yet neoliberalism is conceptually opaque, “often substituting for capitalism itself.”¹⁸ Perhaps this explains why Bello, on the one hand, argues the “ideological scaffolding” of the “EDSA republic”¹⁹ has imploded but, on the other hand, considers the “substance and discourse of liberal democracy” to be under attack. Yet the 1987 constitution established under Aquino is by no means defunct, and the “liberal bloc” was not liberal but rather neoliberal — which is a politics of state capitalism.

Fascism or populism?

Max Horkheimer wrote that “whoever is not willing to talk about capitalism should also keep quiet about fascism.”²⁰ The Marxist vision is one in which the proletariat, by abolishing itself, abolishes capitalism.²¹ Under the dictatorship of the proletariat, there is no longer any use for political force. The governing of people is replaced by the administration of things, and the state withers away. In contrast, advocacy for democracy and “the people” is not the latter’s abolition but rather “the abolition of aristocracy and clergy” such that the Third Estate becomes the Nation.

It is in the “Rousseauian” (rather than Marxist) vein that Filipino Leftists rally “the people,” usually through “the autoapoiesis of its rebellious political culture.”²² Bello’s first book credits the nationalist Renato Constantino and Filipino Maoist Joma Sison as inspirations. Constantino argues “the people” develop nationalism via an anti-American “counter-consciousness.” For Sison, “the people” is a popular front of four classes that is simultaneously anti-feudal in clearing away pre-modern vestiges, anti-imperialist in its attack on the comprador bourgeoisie, and anti-fascist in its struggle against the military regime.

The CPP — an underground organization largely dismissive of bourgeois politics — thought it was leading the liberals. Yet its united front proved useless during the 1986 military revolt that triggered the “people power” uprising. The massive wins of elite politicians in the 1986 and 1987 elections were driven by “money, high media visibility, leftist ambivalence, and the continuing strong influence of patron-client relationships.”²³ Elite politicians

achieved hegemony by gaining control of institutions and the mass media to secure “a strong degree of legitimacy among the ruled.”²⁴ Elections mobilized the masses rather than the Left.

While human-rights violations intensified during Cory Aquino’s tenure, “elite democracy” was deemed an advancement over not only Marcos but the CPP, which had trampled upon the independence and non-identity of civil society organizations to the Party. The latter’s instrumentalist view of society manifested in its idea of “class justice,” something one deserved by having the correct politics or “by virtue of their membership in the right classes.”²⁵ The notion of universal human rights was a panacea to the cynicism and groupthink that fueled the Party’s bloody self-immolation in a late 1980s purge. Bello, a leading figure among the Rejectionists (RAs) that bolted from the CPP, conceived of the Left as a civil-society force that would be able to “alter the exercise of state power.”²⁶ Mass movements would no longer be secretly steered by party cadre but affect “the formal structure of the state to make it less resistant to the attainment of the people’s interests.”²⁷

As an alternative to the CPP, Bello and other RAs first created Bukluran sa Ikauunlad ng Sosyalistang Isip at Gawa (Movement for the Development of Socialist Thought and Action), then the less explicitly socialist Akbayan. According to Akbayan’s ideologue, Ronald Llamas, the organization was “something in between an electoral party and a political party”²⁸ without a traditional bailiwick but with a national “spread which enabled us to win.”²⁹ By Noynoy Aquino’s 2010 election, Llamas was appointed presidential advisor, while Bello became a congressperson.

How was Akbayan drawn into a position of opposing first elite democracy, then neoliberalism, to one of acting as its handmaiden? For Tamás, The Left’s anti-fascist resistance *prevented* Marxian politics by legitimating the modernization of the Third World and Fordist welfare statism.³⁰ The communists blessed FDR’s “progressive” Democratic Party with the aspirations of socialism in order to “fight the right.”³¹ Today, it is through *resistance* that the Left *opposes neoliberalism as a pressure tactic*, while capitalist politics leads the Left “in identifying neoliberalism with liberalism per se.”³²

By the logic of anti-fascism, Duterte contradicts the “values and aims of liberal democracy.” Yet Bello’s recent arrest for “cyberlibel” has occurred under a law signed into effect by the “liberal” Ninoy Aquino. While the persecution must be denounced — the alleged victim was a former aid of Sara Duterte — Bello’s failure to equally oppose the Liberals must be noted. His anti-Duterte and now, anti-Marcos demagoguery reprises 1980s-style resistance while preserving the ideological contours (and Left-Liberal orientation) of the 1930s–40s anti-fascist popular front.³³

Instead of anti-fascism, Bello’s junior colleague and former Akbayan comrade, Lisandro Claudio, has argued for a 1950s–60s liberalism that is “bureaucratic, a boring pencil-pushing process” for “brokering conflict and managing bargains.”³⁴ Claudio correctly notes Mussolini’s fascism combined Right-wing authoritarianism with a socialist-style mass party. By contrast, Duterte belonged to the Maoist youth group Makabayan Kabataan and was secretly an anti-Marcos activist that Cory Aquino appointed as Officer in Charge (OIC) of Davao. If, as Bello claims, Noynoy Aquino’s presidency was the last gasp of the republic established under his mother Cory,³⁵ then Duterte was the last man, the dregs, of EDSA democracy.

Claudio considers Duterte a populist.³⁶ From this perspective, Duterte’s attack on the Liberals is less a rejection of liberal values than the “elite democracy” that Ferdinand Marcos had repressed. It is well known that the elite looked down their noses at Marcos and in particular his wife Imelda as tacky nouveau riche. By contrast, the Aquinos belong to *alta sociedad*. They descend from Chinese mestizos who established themselves during the Spanish colonial regime and “consolidated their wealth with political power under the Americans”³⁷ — typically as landed agricultural exporters. Following WWII, these “caciques” used the legislature to access government finance,³⁸ war reparations, foreign exchange allocations, and the American market. The state was weak, the oligarchy strong. Like Marcos Sr., Duterte is a provincial upstart, and who can blame him when he thumbs his nose at elite hypocrisy? Bongbong inherits Duterte’s populist appeal.

While less credulous than claims of fascism, Claudio’s “populism” analysis misses Bello’s insights into the *crisis of neoliberalism as a form of politics*. For Bello, fascism contradicts liberal democracy. The contradiction corresponds to the Marxist concept of Bonapartism, which is not merely authoritarianism per se but democracy in contradiction with liberalism *as a function of capitalism*.

Bonapartism

For American political theorist and Trotskyist James Burnham, Bonapartism is by no means undemocratic but instead is democracy’s historical product. The plebiscite — used following Marcos’s declaration of martial law to legitimate the 1973 constitution — is, for Burnham, the perfection of democracy: “The Bonapartist leader can regard

himself, and be regarded, as the quintessential democrat; his despotism is simply the omnipotent people ruling and disciplining itself.”³⁹ The popular legitimacy Burnham would accord Ferdinand Marcos — first as an elected president, then through plebiscites and (poorly contested) elections — is not generally held by Filipino Leftists. For Francisco Nemenzo, another of Bello’s former comrades, the Marcos regime leveraged executive fiat to “ensure a favorable climate for foreign investments.”⁴⁰ Nemenzo argued that so long as the Philippines remained dependent on America, it would be “forever trapped in a vicious cycle of weak constitutional regimes and Bonapartist dictatorships.” The only way out of the situation was to “get out of dependency.”⁴¹

Bello hesitates to apply the label of fascist to Marcos Sr., for whom “there was no immediate revolutionary threat.”⁴² Bello prefers instead to emphasize the Marcosian development state’s predatory character. His crucial insight into the “development debacle” focused not on Marcos’s authoritarianism but the 1980s crisis of the World Bank’s neo-Keynesianism. Bello has been one of the staunchest critics of neoliberal advocacy for the “dismantling of developmental states in much of the South.”⁴³ The neoliberal “Volker shock” reined in inflation but had damaging consequences during the 1980s Third World debt crisis. “People power” was a democratic rebellion against neo-Keynesian technocratic mismanagement.⁴⁴ The same concerns are hardly attributed to Duterte, whose political strategy Bello considers “the classic fascist way of balancing different class forces while projecting an image of being above class conflict.”⁴⁵

More than fascism, Bello’s definition encapsulates Marxian Bonapartism. Marx noted that in the 1848 Revolution, the rule of the bourgeoisie failed, while the proletariat was not yet able to take power. In the vacuum, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte — Napoleon’s nephew — emerged, rising above society to balance the different and competing social forces. Bonapartism did not merely suppress “the people” but harnessed the masses’ activity.

For Leon Trotsky, “every bourgeois democracy bears the features of Bonapartism,” within which the dominant class is “compelled to tolerate . . . the uncontrolled command of a military and police apparatus over it.”⁴⁶ Marxists define the state as “special bodies of armed men.” Bonaparte’s Society of December 10, the Italian fascist brigades, or the constabulary and military for Marcos, mediate class conflict and social disintegration by force or the threat thereof, with *society’s consent*. The crisis of bourgeois society necessitates a form of state power to manage capitalism *against liberal democracy*.

Paradoxically, the *dependista* nationalist, before pledging allegiance to his country of origin, pays homage to the American revolution. Bello has noted the fealty of Filipino nationalists to American-style liberalism, which “brought them into conflict with the American state.” Their vision derived from the American revolutionaries — “whose bond of solidarity was not shared ethnicity or the same blood but common intellectual and ethical adherence to a set of ideas called democracy.”⁴⁷ In contrast, the New Deal was a social regime underwriting a national Keynesian “economics of growth.”⁴⁸ Keynes rested on Roosevelt — the latter was, after all, not a mere policy wonk or bureaucrat but at the head of a national coalition — a “three-legged stool” of “big labor, big capital, and big government.”⁴⁹ Postwar social democracy — the Fordist welfare state — contradicted classical liberalism.

History and helplessness

Like the crisis of the New Deal coalition, the crisis of neoliberalism is most legible as a political crisis. Duterte, like Trump (and Regan in the 1980s and FDR in the 1930s), was called “fascist,” as if democracy were collapsing. Stigmatizing the anti-globalization Right as “populists” or “fascists” has a specific demagogical function — delegitimizing elections — which obscures the fact that capitalism is reconstructed through democracy.⁵⁰

Duterte can be seen as post-neoliberal in terms of political realignment⁵¹ such that the administration of capitalism continues through the “Right” rather than the “Left.” Duterte’s outstretched fist is not a fascist gesture but a halfway Red Salute. The hysterical anti-fascist condemnation of Duterte, by which the Left merely makes recommendations to the Liberal Party on how to defeat the Right, will eventually give way — if not under the newly elected Bongbong Marcos, then his successor — to explanations for the new status quo. Abnegating responsibility to critique the present, the Left instead plays catch up.⁵²

Missing in opposition to Duterte is a recognition of how the Left’s wounds were self-inflicted. Neoliberalism institutionalized “social and political demobilization,” while the privatization of state functions via NGOs has not revived civil society but has sapped politics of “any substantial forces for reform since the 1980s.”⁵³ To reimagine resistance to neoliberalism as the loss of liberalism may authorize a 1930s–40s anti-fascism but will not make good on nor illuminate the defeats of the 1980s. “Doing the right thing” expresses helplessness in the face of history.⁵⁴ **IP**

hosted during the 2022 Platypus International Convention at the University of Chicago, April 1, 2022, the video of which is available online at <https://youtu.be/KyJkMoaoH0E>.

⁵ Bello, “Requiem for the EDSA Republic.”

⁶ Joseph Scalice, “First as Tragedy, Second as Farce: Marcos, Duterte and the Communist Parties of the Philippines,” *World Socialist Web Site*, September 1, 2020, available online at <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2020/09/01/lect-s01.html>. Duterte was supported as a paragon of intensifying [progressive and anti-people] contradictions, then opposed as fascist once the peace talks broke down. For an example of this argument, see National People’s Summit, “Duterte’s First 100 days: Significant achievements, intensifying contradictions” (October 5, 2016), available online at <https://www.bayanusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/100days-of-DU30.pdf>.

⁷ Joma Sison, interviewed by Anghelo Godino, *PRISM*, September 9, 2020, available online at <https://prism.net/2020/09/10/on-trotskyites-and-other-slanderers/>.

⁸ Walden Bello, “Rodrigo Duterte: A Fascist Original,” in *The Duterte Reader*, ed. Nicole Curato (Quezon City: Bughaw, 2017), 78.

⁹ Bello, “The Far Right,” 395.

¹⁰ Walden Bello, “Counterrevolution in the Countryside,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 45, no. 1 (2017): 25–26.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹² Samuel P. Huntington, “Democracy’s Third Wave,” *Journal of Democracy* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 12. The 1820s–1920s and 1940s–1950s were the first two “waves.”

¹³ Walden Bello, “The Race to Replace a Dying Neoliberalism,” waldenbello.org, July 7, 2020, available at <https://waldenbello.org/the-race-to-replace-a-dying-neoliberalism/>.

¹⁴ Chris Cutrone, “The Sandernistas: The final triumph of the 1980s,” *Platypus Review* 82 (December 2015 – January 2016), available online at <https://platypus1917.org/2015/12/17/sandernistas-final-triumph-1980s/>: “Far from a crisis for neoliberalism, neoliberalism has been further consolidated against any contenders. This is a lesson for Sanders’s supporters: when Hillary is elected by primary voters as the Democratic Party candidate for President, they will have chosen and given a mandate to neoliberalism.”

¹⁵ Walden Bello, *Capitalism’s Last Stand? Deglobalization in the Age of Austerity* (London: Zed Books, 2013), 83.

¹⁶ Cutrone, “The Sandernistas.”

¹⁷ Bello, “Dying Neoliberalism.”

¹⁸ Chris Cutrone, on the panel “The crisis of neoliberalism,” held on February 18, 2017, during the Platypus Affiliated Society’s third European Conference at the University of Vienna, the transcript of which can be found in *Platypus Review* 96 (May 2017), available online at <https://platypus1917.org/2017/05/03/the-crisis-of-neoliberalism/> and <https://chriscutrone.platypus1917.org/?p=2566>.

¹⁹ So-called for the Epifanio de los Santos Avenue on which the public converged with military rebels to overthrow the Marcos government in 1986.

²⁰ Max Horkheimer, “The Jews and Europe,” in *Critical Theory and Society*, eds. Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas Mackay Kellner (New York: Routledge, 1989), 92.

²¹ G. M. Tamás, “Telling the Truth About Class,” *Socialist Register* 42 (2006): 2, available online at <https://socialistregister.com/index.php/srv/article/view/5852>.

²² *Ibid.*, 2.

²³ Walden Bello and John Gershman, “Democratization and stabilization in the Philippines,” *Critical Sociology* 17, no. 1 (1990): 42–43.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁵ Walden Bello, “The Crisis of the Philippine Progressive Movement,” *Philippine Alternatives* (August–September 1992): 174.

²⁶ Walden Bello, “The dual crisis of the Philippine Progressive Movement,” in *Reexamining and Renewing the Philippine Progressive Vision*, eds. John Gershman and Walden Bello (Quezon City: Forum for Philippine Alternatives, 1993), 17–18.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 21–22.

²⁸ Ken Fuller, *The Last Vision: The Philippine Left 1986–2010* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2015), 423.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 425.

³⁰ Tamás, “Telling the Truth,” 9–10.

³¹ Leonard, “Marxism and liberalism.”

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Walden Bello, “Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte Is a Wildly Popular Fascist Now what?”, *The Nation*, January 9, 2017, available online at <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/philippine-president-rodrido-duterte-is-a-wildly-popular-fascist/>: “The only certainty members of the anti-fascist front can count on is that they are doing the right thing.”

³⁴ Lisandro Claudio, *Liberalism and the Postcolony: Thinking the State in 20th-Century Philippines* (Quezon City: National University of Singapore Press, 2017), 7. This would appear to be a nostalgia for the New Deal, an apparent alternative to both the nationalist model as well as the Liberal Party’s austerity regime under Noynoy Aquino.

³⁵ Bello, “Requiem.”

³⁶ Lisandro Claudio, “Basagan ng Trip with Leloy Claudio: Is Duterte a dictator, a fascist, or a populist?”, *Rappler*, December 6, 2017, available online at <https://youtu.be/aMv0V9zhr4>.

³⁷ Benedict Anderson, “Cacique Democracy and the Philippines: Origins and Dreams,” *New Left Review* 169 (May/June 1988): 3–31.

³⁸ Alfred W. McCoy, “A Tale of Two Families: Generational Succession in Filipino and American Family Firms,” *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 3, no. 2 (2015): 185.

³⁹ James Burnham, *The Machiavellians: Defenders of Freedom* (Washington: Gateway Editions, 1987), 268.

⁴⁰ Francisco Nemenzo Jr., “Dependency and Liberation: Focus on the Third World,” *Philippine Political Science Journal* 5, no. 7 (1978): 120.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁴² Bello, “Counterrevolution in the Countryside,” 48.

⁴³ Walden Bello, “The capitalist conjuncture: over-accumulation, financial crises, and the retreat from globalization,” *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 8 (2006): 1348.

⁴⁴ Walden Bello, *The Development Debacle: The World Bank in the Philippines* (San Francisco: Institute for Food and Development Policy, 1982), 206.

⁴⁵ Bello, “Counterrevolution in the Countryside,” 52.

⁴⁶ Leon Trotsky, “Again on the Question of Bonapartism,” *Writings of Leon Trotsky, vol. 7, 1934–1935* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1971), 206–09.

⁴⁷ Walden Bello, review of Lisandro Claudio’s *Liberalism and the Postcolony: Thinking the State in 20th-Century Philippines*, *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 33, no. 3 (November 2018): 689.

⁴⁸ The Platypus Historians Group, “Friedrich Hayek and the legacy of Milton Friedman: Neo-liberalism and the question of freedom (In part, a response to Naomi Klein),” *Platypus Review* 8 (November 2008), available online at <https://platypus1917.org/2008/11/01/friedrich-hayek-and-the-legacy-of-milton-friedman-neo-liberalism-and-the-question-of-freedom/>.

⁴⁹ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1990), 142.

⁵⁰ Cutrone, “The crisis of neoliberalism.”

⁵¹ Due to the perennial lack of political party discipline in Philippine politics, this is in some ways more obscure than in the United States. Nevertheless, the so-called “liberal bloc” most certainly collapsed soon after the 2016 election, when it deserted over into Duterte’s coalition.

⁵² Cutrone, “The crisis of neoliberalism.”

⁵³ Cutrone, “The Sandernistas.”

⁵⁴ Moishe Postone, “History and Helplessness,” *Public Culture* 18, no. 1 (2006): 93–110.